



2019-2020 Student Focus Group Report

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Annual student focus groups shed light on whether and the extent to which students had developed evaluation skills through classroom activities, teamwork, mentorship and working collaboratively with organizations. Most of the 2020 focus group questions were the same as in previous years. This allowed us to identify patterns over time. The Evaluation-Squared team also added questions pertaining to the COVID-19 disruption to face-to-face learning, not only to understand how students experienced the transition to remote learning, but also to plan for an unknown future.

Audrey, a member of the Evaluation-Squared team, conducted the interactive focus group with the students via Zoom. Students were given an Excel document with each question listed in individual tabs. Students were given time to reflect on each question and record their answers in Excel. After each question, every student shared with the classmates their answers. In-person time expired half way through the questions, and students filled the rest of the answers on their own. One student did not submit answers. Compared to the student focus group in 2019, this year's focus group generated nearly twice the data, likely because of the change from recording answers on index cards to typing into Excel.

The focus group data suggest that the Evaluation Lab continues to create opportunities for applied learning unlike those offered in other UNM programs. Students build a toolbox of skills over the course of two semesters which meet the Evaluation Lab's goal of improving student capacity to support New Mexico community organizations to conduct program evaluation.

Student skill development is enhanced through relationship formation with fellow students, team leads, and organizations. The data also suggest that the Evaluation Lab meets its goal of improving capacity of New Mexico community organizations to develop and implement program evaluations as evidenced by the use of logic models, multiyear evaluation strategies, and evaluation planning tools.

The Lab will continue to improve by paying attention to multiyear trends of student feedback especially related to issues of communication, division of labor, and workload management.

As mentioned above, the focus group was conducted via Zoom. To keep data analysis manageable, the facilitator should provide enough time to conduct focus group and consider limiting responses by word count. Coding and analysis with a group makes for a richer and more participatory-based evaluation report, and is highly recommended.

Goals of the Evaluation Lab:

To improve UNM Evaluation Lab student capacity to support New Mexico community organizations to conduct program evaluations.

To improve the capacity of New Mexico community organizations to develop and implement program evaluations, translate findings into program enhancements, and report findings to funders and other stakeholders.

Themes, Recommendations, & Trends

Fall Semester 2019	
Positive Themes	Delta themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Class size and small group work facilitated collaborative learning. • Foundation of evaluation and methods, especially the Social Profit Handbook. • Field trips to partner organizations very helpful in understanding how the evaluation work contributed to the work of the organizations. • Interactive tutorials: coding qualitative data, conducting focus groups, Atlas TI, logic models, PowerPoint presentations, budgeting, and timelines. • Using class time to work on evaluation projects, review project concerns, and discuss data examples related to projects. • Speakers effective and engaging; students appreciated diversity of experience and subject matter. • Timelines clear and assignments scaffolded to work together over the semester. • Instructor approachable, clear in communication, and maintained a productive class. • NM Evaluator Conference excellent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have fall LCs—workshop data, workplans, etc. • Broad overview of all types of evaluation early in semester (i.e. process vs outcome) to be prepared to contribute to early meetings with organizations on choosing their evaluation project for the year • Create system to ensure everyone on the team is contributing equally • “Scrap main textbook” • Class time to work on evaluation project; tough to coordinate schedules • More hands-on training like in Spring: i.e. software training or any method needed to conduct evaluation for the year. • Have all fieldtrips and first meetings with organizations very early in the semester. • Would like to learn about the other evaluation projects organizations have done previously. • Would like to meet with past fellows to talk about best practices. • Department would not accept CR/NC
<p>Quotations</p> <p><i>“Going over evaluation projects earlier would help to get an idea of what the whole year will look like.”</i></p> <p><i>“[Remembering fall] could be clouded by how weird the spring became at the halfway point due to COVID.”</i></p>	
<p>Multiyear Trends</p> <p>Students would like to “hit the ground running” if their organization has worked with the EvalLab for multiple years by understanding past evaluation projects before starting on this year’s project.</p>	
<p>Recommendations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure students understand that the evaluation type comes from the evaluation question or issue needing to be addressed. • Have a panel with past evaluation fellows and team leads to review previous evaluations. • Have a presentation early in the semester on previous evaluations to give students a sense of types of evaluation and history of projects in the lab. 	

Spring Learning Community

Positive Themes	Delta Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing projects peer to peer: getting feedback, presenting, seeing others' work, workshoping issues with the class, discussing group issues • Team leads attending LC, participating, giving feedback. Students appreciated Team Lead experienced input. • LC info posted in advance • Atmosphere laidback • Reduction of class time helpful to give teams opportunity to meet • Clear deadlines and speaker timeline • Team lead front loaded work → for easier spring than fall. • Assignment scaffolding • Hands-on didacts: coding session • Student focus group: benefits of hearing others' ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes to structure: LC should start in fall with examples of content to discuss, too many LC and more time between sessions, too difficult to come up with a new things to talk about each week. Ran out of things to say, spent too much time on presenting the entire poster or report when we needed help on specific sections, review data earlier. Clearer expectations for Spring deliverables. More time to work on reports in class. • Team Leads: need to be present in LC with clear expectations about Team Lead role. Feedback should come from students first, Instructor/Team Lead last. • Changes to content: poster didactic with guidelines, final report didactic & peer to peer workshop on final report. Define recommendations and next steps. • Speakers: tech issues, Excel problems. Fix these issues in advance. Would like a full time evaluator to speak to class. • Focus group: more time on the student focus group or fewer questions

Quotations

"This is the type of methods course I wanted from my department, but they didn't offer anything as in-depth so I'm thankful for the opportunity to learn something new."

"Reports seemed to fall by the wayside"

"Great experience! It gave me marketable skills and a very different kind of learning."

Multiyear Trends

Students continue to say that Learning Communities ought to start in Fall semester to coincide with data collection. Some groups find LC in Spring to be pointless, as all of their major decisions have been made already which could have benefited from LC input.

Recommendations

- Learning Communities: Start when data collection starts.
- Team Leads: Create a big picture overview of all deliverables, timeline, and tasks for students to understand what's coming.
- Have didactic on poster making.
- Encourage report writing as students complete the work
- Prioritize student feedback in LC by explicitly stating that student feedback comes first before instructor or team leads chime in.
- Discuss difference between recommends vs next steps.
- Be clear on team lead role and expectations.
- Consider changes to structure and content of LC.
- Change public determination form to "post" instead of "publish" to avoid scaring organizations off.

COVID-19 Adaptations	
Positive Themes	Delta Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexibility: Easy transition, timeline, syllabus, considerate of organizations • Instructor: communication excellent, gave significant notice in changes to schedule and assignments, decisive. Much better transition to online format than other courses. Inclusive of students in planning Expo. Weekly reminders very helpful. Gave time to review concerns or questions very helpful. • Technology: Same Zoom link helpful, screen sharing a plus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technology: Zoom presentations, Zoom fatigue, poster sharing difficult on Zoom → easy to lose sight of the whole poster just zooming in on components. Difficult to contribute to online discussion • Expectations: Lack of clarity, received PPT template after making presentation. Time of class → need time to sign in. • Organizations: dealing with pressing matters due to pandemic created obstacles for project. • Need time to ask questions outside of class
<p>Quotations</p> <p><i>“[COVID transition] was handled the best possible way it could have been.”</i></p> <p><i>“Learning Community doesn’t easily translate to online format.”</i></p>	
<p>Recommendations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey class to determine class start times. Some students would like flexibility with log on time to account for technical difficulties on Zoom. • Survey class to determine mini office hours with instructor either right before or right after class, so students can ask questions more privately like they would if they stayed after class in person. 	
<p>Skill Development</p>	
<p><u>Evaluation</u>: Set up an evaluation plan, write an evaluation plan, discuss the evaluation process, understand what evaluation means and its utility, create needs statements using data, write an evaluation report, create logic models, develop and design a rubric, collect and analyze data, use various methods for data collections, plan and conduct focus groups, keep a focus group on track with a positive mindset, code qualitative data, theme qualitative data, build a survey, interpret qualitative data, use data to solve problems, and balance qualitative and quantitative analysis.</p> <p><u>Project Management</u>: Create a timeline, create a work plan, develop clear expectations of work being performed, create divisions of labor, create a budget, create detailed logs of evaluation activities, manage a group, manage tight timelines, work strategically with an organization, collaborate with UNM tea, collaborate with community organizations, manage difficult clients, navigate tricky organizational friction, write professional reports, design professional posters.</p> <p><u>Software</u>: Improve Excel skills, utilize the basics of Atlas TI and Tableau, use Excel for transcriptions.</p> <p><u>Personal Development</u>: Speak publicly, improve interpersonal communication with team and organization, be flexible, be professional, address vulnerable populations.</p>	
<p>How are partner organizations embedding evaluation?</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take evaluation seriously / Final evaluation product used to continue evaluation <p>“[The organization’s] commitment to evaluation will likely extend beyond their affiliation with the UNM Evaluation Lab.”</p>	
<p>Recommendations</p>	
<p>Based on responses, participants did not answer the question of embedding but rather gave information on what they told the organization to do to embed evaluation. This question may need to be explained for participants to answer in the future.</p>	

Working with Organizations

Positive Themes:

- Learned about nonprofit structure, function, and service to vulnerable communities. Learned how to cultivate organization's trust. Developed professionalism. Appreciated how evaluation can help organizations.
- Organization had clear ideas of desired evaluation. Willing and open to suggestions. Having two organizational leaders head the evaluation helped.
- Organization had good relationship with UNM EvalLab.

Deltas Themes:

- Communication: Biggest theme. Students would like weekly commitment for organizations for communication. Organizations need communication on purpose of evaluation project, purpose of EvalLab, and purpose of work planned to be performed. Lack of communication between org team members and org staff created difficulty. Evaluation Coordinator prevented flow of information in and out of org. No or slow answer to emails.
- Lack of staff buy-in: Problems arose when a program was evaluated as a top-down order. Staff too busy to participate. Coordinating meetings was a challenge.
- Do not work with organizations outside of Albuquerque.

Quotations

"It certainly kept us on our toes and gave us an exercise in diplomacy . . ."

"We had to step up and make the organization trust us."

"I learned how to conduct an evaluation that involved the organization as part of the team and took multiple stakeholders into consideration. If needed I believe I could work with an organization on my own to conduct an evaluation."

Multiyear Trends

Working with organizations outside of Albuquerque poses extra challenges and work for students. Communication issues with the organization create frustrating project dynamics for students. Students and Team Leads identify multi-year issues within an organization that create difficult situations for teams year after year with that organization.

Recommendations

- "Having a meeting at the beginning of the Fall semester where all team leads, students, and organization leaders must attend to go over the basics of what the evaluation lab does, what the purpose of the lab is, the contract, requirements for the org, and student roles in the work."
- Do not work with organizations outside of Albuquerque.
- Create communications plan with organizations—especially established organizations that may have become complacent or new organizations that do not understand time commitment.
- Present purpose of EvalLab and evaluation each year regardless of how long org has worked with EvalLab.

UNM Team	
Positive Themes	Delta Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team Leads: communicative, approachable, helpful, knowledgeable. Allowed fellows to learn while also guiding in the right direction, reminded team of deadlines, attending LCs, helped communicate with the organization, and walked through coding process. Encouraged out of the box thinking. Available on campus. • Relationships: equal effort, division of labor, and vested interest. A team of three made less of a workload on the evaluation, and a bit extra as far as coordination. Fellows worked well together in the entire class not just in individual groups; respectful and provided useful input. Easy to work with partner, open to meetings, flexible with times. Complimentary skills. Quick writer teamed with strong editor. Balance in skills more important than actual evaluation or data experience. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team lead: Engagement was lacking due to absence making deadlines stressful. Students would like more direction in first organization meeting. Students would like clearer expectation of the team lead role. • Coordinating schedules was a source of frustration for several groups. • Division of labor was unequal leading to individual frustrations from carrying the load. • Difficult editing the same document at the same time. • Zoom tech difficulties made meetings a challenge. • Team members faced personal challenges due to COVID-19 including distractions at home and multiple stressors.
<p>Quotations</p> <p><i>“It worked to have “someone review and edit work done.”</i></p> <p><i>“We had a very good team with a great team lead who managed to allow the fellows enough room to learn and use their unique skills in the evaluation while being available to ensure we were moving in the needed direction.”</i></p> <p><i>“I found this year's fellows to have worked well together on the whole - very respectful of one another and provided useful input regarding each group's project.”</i></p>	
<p>Multiyear Trends</p> <p>Students continue to have difficulties if the work is divided and executed unequally. Students have the best experiences when all members of the team are engaged participants in the process. Coordinating schedules, communication issues persist.</p>	
<p>Recommendations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Mid-point check ups would be helpful to ensure that everyone is contributing to the project.” • Create clear expectations and a system of work management that shows each team member’s assigned tasks. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address issues sooner rather than later. • Have regular team check-ins outside of organization meetings. 	